

Negotiation

Introduction

When we hear the word “negotiation”, many imagine a corporate CEO pursuing a hostile takeover, the attempt to convince a criminal to let hostages go, or reaching some agreement with a battle of lawyers in court. By negotiation within BDSM, I am NOT talking about whittling away limits or an adversarial “tit-for tat” which leverages a want in exchange for more permission or reduction of limits. This is actually a perversion of what negotiation should be.



Negotiation is about achieving cooperation

BDSM negotiations do not need to be tense, combative or manipulative, but rather could be carried out with a spirit of cooperation and mutuality. I prefer negotiation to take a cooperative vein in which parties are able to state up front desires and limits, have those limits respected, and seek a mutually satisfying dynamic within stated desires. If Limits are not being respected or the risks/fears of which are being discounted or trivialized, then the foundation of mutual respect has already been undermined and I recommend you immediately Stop and Disengage. Find someone else who can be an adult and listen to your concerns respectfully.

I observe two primary types of BDSM negotiations: (a) a scene negotiation that addresses the limits and wants for parties involved in a finite play encounter, and (b) a relationship negotiation that addresses the limits and goals in long-term relationship dynamics.

Note: what I offer is my view based on personal experience,

study and research, and observed in the community. This article is by no means comprehensive or absolute, and is meant to offer a starting point for your own exploration towards what fits your needs and personal style.

Scene Negotiation

Scene negotiation is primarily focused on a single instance of interaction or activity. This may be done well in advance of an event or party where adequate time has been given to knowing the individuals needs, wants, fears, concerns, limits, etc. It may also be done “on the spot” or before a play date in a quiet spot or over coffee/tea*. Areas of discussion tend to focus around key elements of desired play, known limits, and other factors that can impact the scene such as prior experience, health conditions, medications, psycho-emotional triggers, after-care needs, and preventative maintenance, etc. Typically the more intense the scene, the more after-care will be needed following the scene and after an event or party to deal with “drop” – the psychological let down from intensity and biochemical normalization (adrenaline, dopamine, endorphins, etc). There is also the physical after-care for body, muscle, tendon, skin, etc to help prevent injury, infection, scarring, severe hematoma(s), etc.

Most of wants and limits are fairly well defined and should be stated explicitly, not implied. No means no, yes means yes, there are Hard Limits (non-negotiable), and clear Wants. This is especially true for pickup play scenes and at events and parties where it is better to deal in absolutes and clear statements in order to reduce the chance of misunderstandings and crash a scene in public. It also makes the jobs of DMs on duty easier by being able to clearly adjudicate between a good scene and a bad one, or something that might be turning overly dangerous and needs to be stopped. I recommend you also

discuss (before and after) how you respond in play (e.g. disassociation, time dilation, ability to verbalize, etc), and therefore how to check-in to ensure its all good (e.g. “do I have a green light to keep going?”) and non-verbal ways if things go bad OR you are too deep to even know (e.g. going limp and dropping a card or scarf).

KISS – Keep It Simple & Sexy. The more complex, the more wiggle room, the more “wishy washy” and the greater the chance for things to go awry. Remember, chaos and complexity goes hand in hand – Cover your bases.

Relationship Negotiation

Relationship negotiation is primarily focused on the long-term dynamic between parties such as the nature of the relationship, power dynamic, roles & responsibilities, and long-term goals. An example of a relationship structure with an agreement for evolution is a a closed pairing between a Dominant and a submissive that has a shared (and agreed upon) goal of slowly changing into a TPE stable triad with occasional open play/use. Limits in relationships have some more wiggle room than in scene negotiation, and need to be grouped or discussed as hard limits (fuck no), soft limits (maybe), and what lay between (maybe later, but not yet). Wants may also have similar elements in terms of those things you are looking for as the primary element of the relationship (e.g. some kink & light power exchange) and progress to deepening that dynamic while still honoring certain hard limits or working to remove all limits.

Negotiation and Consent

When I talk about negotiation, I am simply referring to a dialog about wants and limits. As described above, negotiation is a vital part of defining a scene as much as it is defining the nature of a longer term relationship. When I say relationship, it may not necessarily be a romantic one, but rather any connection between two or more individuals over a prolonged period of time, regardless of purpose. An example can be a 6-month slave-training period where the focus is on learning about service and submission without romantic or sexual components. But before anything starts, we need to have a frank discussion.... and there needs to be consent.

Negotiation and consent go hand in hand. One cannot give consent, or expect to have been given consent, unless elements of wants/goals, limits, and fears have been addressed. In essence, if you have not had this conversation, then you don't have much in the way of having a meaningful dialog that establishes the degree and boundary of consent.

A reality that many would wish were not the case is that there is ALWAYS conditional consent. That is what negotiation helps determine, the degree, breadth, depth or "dimension" of the boundaries of the other individual, as well as the opportunity to describe your own boundaries. Both tops and bottoms, Dominants and submissives, etc., all have boundaries somewhere. For example, I will not shoot you in the head no matter how much you beg. There are ALWAYS limits and boundaries. Anyone that insists they have no boundaries is likely to have deeper psychological issues you should probably avoid as a partner. This is why "SSC" or "Safe, Sane, Consensual" kink has been the mantra for decades – and negotiation helps you determine what the involved parties consider Safe activity, Sane behavior, and Consensual engagement.

It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye – so lets just avoid that, shall we?

Negotiation and “Consensual Non-consent”

This is one of those difficult things for some to grasp because it creates very fuzzy boundaries. The essence of this type of play or dynamic involves both honoring and transgressing limits. The psychological and physical risks are higher, and thus should not be taken casually. It should be reserved for someone that has proven to be reliable, accountable, responsible, and in all ways trustworthy. The idea is to help break down resistance on particular limits OR to provide for an authentic experience which both parties truly want but anticipate resistance when the moment of truth arrives.

An example might be a desire for a submissive to have a rape play scene, but the submissive thinks they will resist when the time comes. In this case, there is consent to continue in the face of sudden non-consent (ignoring the cries and pleas to stop). Another example might be breath play or other highly intense forms of physical/pain play that might provoke withdrawal of consent (e.g. interrogation play), but where there has been a pre-agreed goal of breaking a barrier or tolerance. Again, this is HIGHLY RISKY to all involved and is considered one of the more intense forms of “edge play” that should be reserved for the more experienced among stable relationships, and ideally with someone on hand as a backup if it gets ugly.

Closing

Negotiation should be a cooperative discussion between adults in order to determine the goals, wants and outcomes as much as the restrictions, limits and risks of a scene and/or relationship. This dialog should be conducted with a clear head and with the responsibility that you ARE accountable for what you reveal and state as much as what you hold back. Be smart, be responsible, and be thorough as you can be. If others cannot respect your needs, limits, or the time involved to negotiate to make you feel SAFE, then find someone else. If they cannot be respectful and patient during negotiations, do you think they will be during a scene, especially one that goes wrong?

**NOTE: I strongly discourage alcohol while in negotiation or just prior to a scene as it impacts judgment and effects physiological responses (hydration, circulation, muscle/tendon, nervous system) that can complicate a managing a scene; while not every instance of alcohol relates to an trip to the ER, most kink that goes to the ER involved alcohol.*

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